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Inside the Hermès Workshop That Makes Its Iconic Bags

At the new Hermès workshop in Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, France, the Kelly serves as a training ground for freshly minted leather artisans.

BY ALEXIS CHEUNG

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Hermès artisans in the new Saint-Vincent-de-Paul workshop. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI

There is a kind of fashion object so long-lasting, so tirelessly wanted that its name becomes recognizable, a metonym for the brand that made it: the Air Jordan, the Love bracelet. Few brands, successful though they may be, attain that kind of saturation. Hermès has done it twice: the Birkin and, arguably the first of the household-name phenomena, the Kelly. Originally designed in the 1930s as the *Petit sac haut, à courroie, simplifié*, the Kelly was rechristened after the newly crowned Princess Grace was photographed, in 1956, clutching it to conceal her early pregnancy; the image appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine.





The Kelly, pictured here, comprises 36 pieces of leather and takes up to 20 hours for an artisan to complete. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI.

But in the Hermès artisan workshops, the vaunted bag isn't a waiting list status symbol, it's an education: Usually the first item newly minted leather artisans construct, it serves as a leatherwork 101. "The Kelly bag is one of the most complex bags we have in terms of our *savoir faire*, or know-how, which is really based on the tradition of saddlery and harnesses," says Olivier Fournier, executive vice president of compliance and organization development at Hermès International, who oversees the company's sustainable development. With its crisp top flap, shoulder strap, and ladylike single handle (the most easily spotted differentiating feature from the double-handled Birkin), it requires 36 pieces of leather, a handful of metal parts, and 15 to 20 hours for one artisan to complete. Mastery of the Kelly means mastery over virtually every other Hermès bag design.



Buckles and other hardware are attached by hand. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI.

Indeed, at Hermès so much depends upon a single stitch, taut and tensile, with almost 200 years of tradition. And if each stitch represents a sentence in Hermès's history, which began when the German-born harness maker Thimon Hermès founded the company in Paris in 1837, then its manufacturing workshops are the grammar.

guiding their syntax. These workshops—of which there are 51 in France alone, each dedicated to women's ready-to-wear, perfume, shoes, jewelry, menswear, silk, or home furnishings—are spaces where standards and techniques are passed down and preserved.

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Craftsmen spend 18 months learning the craft, and spend 8 years working towards the title of master artisan. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI.

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Perhaps nowhere is this marriage of craft and legacy more apparent than at the company's newest leather workshop, or *maroquinerie*, which opened this September in the pastoral village of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, on the outskirts of Bordeaux. Not far from the city center or the terroirs teeming with grapevines, a group of 180 artisans (a number that will swell to more than 250 once training and recruiting is complete) can be found selecting, cutting, perfecting, burnishing—and yes, stitching—yards of supple leathers into any one of Hermès's signature bags, all exclusively made in France. "Making a bag is demanding in terms of time and skills," says a Saint-Vincent-de-Paul leather artisan named Emilie, who joined Hermès in 2015. "There's a little bit of our soul in each bag."

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The first Hermès leather workshop opened at the flagship store in Paris in 1880. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI

The leather workshops can be traced to 24 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, where Thierry Hermès's only son, Charles-Émile, opened its flagship store in 1880. The first location outside of Paris opened near Lyon more than 100 years later, in 1989, and the next site came in Pantin in 1992. (All brands self-reference, but Hermès's version is particularly cyclic; artistic director of women's ready-to-wear Nadège Vanhee-Cybulski showed a poncho in her spring 2019 collection with a waistline based on the aprons worn at the Pantin site.)



"Every single gesture has its importance," says one Hermès artisan. "It requires constant concentration so as not to miss anything." PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI

PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI

"We have stuck for centuries now to a craftsmanship model because we strongly believe that to have the quality and the durability we want in our leather goods, we need this artisan approach," explains Fournier. The company maxim, "Luxury is that which can be repaired" (set forth by former CEO Robert Dumas-Hermès), comes to life at the workshops as well: Each year, at 15 dedicated repair shops worldwide, Hermès mends up to 120,000 of its own pieces, from a worn shoulder strap to a decades-old saddle; on rare occasions an artisan might even fix a handbag they crafted more than 30 years prior.





Spools of thread. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI



"Craftsmanship is based on transmission," Fournier says. With every new workshop opening, a handful of the house's 80 master trainers—a position that requires eight years of work at Hermès to attain—travel to teach a new generation of artisans. It's a demanding pedagogy, one that takes 18 months to complete and happens in two phases: The first is verbal, and the second is "at the bench," when artisans apply their new learnings under the watchful eyes of one of 200 designated mentors.



Scenes from the training workshop. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI



At Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, each artisan—many of whom are locals hired through vocational schools and employment offices, often with little experience in leatherwork—uses more than a dozen tools but soon learns that the meticulous attention to detail inherent in an Hermès objet begins with their body. On any given morning, groups of artisans can be found flexing their toes, swaying their arms, and bending their knees, the workshop appearing more like a class for modern dance than a lesson in leatherwork. "Every single gesture has its importance," says Emilie. "It requires constant concentration so as to not miss anything." The angle of the hips, the lean of the torso, the pressure of the hands—all affect the final aesthetic outcome.

Mastery of the Kelly means mastery over virtually every other Hermès bag design.

Despite this staunch adherence to tradition, Hermès will introduce a decidedly modern material this fall: mycelium leather. Developed in collaboration with the San Francisco-based biotech company MycoWorks, this "Fine Mycelium," coined Sylvania by its creators, derives not from cattle but from mushrooms. Fournier insists that its quality and durability meet the same high standards of traditional leathers and that the material continues Hermès's long legacy of innovation—it was, after all, Thierry's grandson Émile-Maurice Hermès who introduced the zipper to handbags in 1922.





Once finished, the bags await further packaging. PHOTOGRAPH BY CYRIL ZANNETTACCI.

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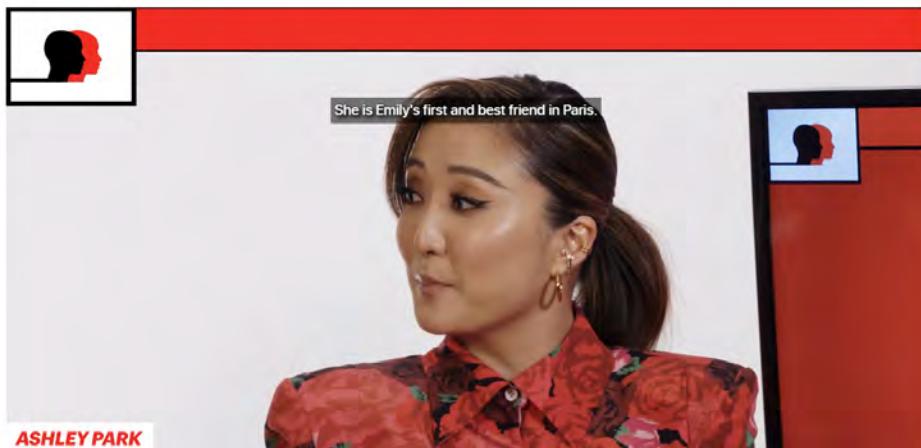
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"We strongly believe that we should not oppose new technology with what we do with the hands and tradition," says Fournier. "Both are compatible." Plus, he adds, "It's a fantastic opportunity for creation, to play with new materials." (For now, this particular play is reserved for the Victoria handbag from the autumn/winter 2021 collection, constructed at a workshop of its own.)

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If “leather is a confrontation with reality,” as artistic director Pierre-Alexis Dumas says, then mycelium leather is a confrontation with changing times. “The recipe for success doesn’t exist, even at Hermès,” says Fournier, who notes that certain styles take years to become a success—the iconic Kelly among them. “The basis for everything is the freedom of creation.”

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BY CHRIS SMITH

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